

BAHRAIN 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution declares Islam to be the official religion and sharia the principal source for legislation. It provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions, provided these do not infringe on the “fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine.” The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and mandates imprisonment for “exposing the state’s official religion to offense and criticism.” There is no legal prohibition against apostasy. The penal code punishes any individual who mocks or disdains another religious group. In public schools, Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslim students in grades one through 12. The constitution guarantees women’s equality with men, “without breaching the provisions” of sharia.

In March, the UN Economic and Social Council’s Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ECOSOC) expressed concern about reports of harassment, intimidation, arrests, and detention of Shia religious figures. In November, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) expressed concerns about reports that authorities restricted the rights of the Shia community to worship and profess their religious beliefs. Reflecting the country’s demographics, the majority of citizen detainees and prisoners were Shia. Human rights groups reported security officials mistreated prisoners. In March, a prominent Shia prisoner accused guards of attempting to assault him. The ombudsman’s office and the government-affiliated National Institution for Human Rights (NIHR) said no physical abuse occurred. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), media, and opposition outlets reported that the government continued to summon Shia rights activists for questioning. NGOs and human rights activists continued to state Shia prisoners received inadequate medical treatment. The government reportedly investigated 12 individuals for unspecified “crimes affecting religion,” charged nine with publicly violating Ramadan restrictions, and imprisoned three for insulting religious symbols. In June, the Ministry of Social Development (MOSD) allowed the Islamic Enlightenment Shia Society, the charity wing of the banned al-Wifaq opposition Shia political party, to reopen; the government had ordered it shut down in 2016.

The government continued to regulate the content of religious sermons of both Sunni and Shia religious leaders. Shia sources said that unlike in prior years, the government did not summon Shia clerics for questioning related to their sermons. According to procession organizers, the government permitted large groups to gather in Manama and in Shia-majority villages to observe Ashura – among the most significant days of the Shia religious calendar. Some Shia prisoners reported that during Ashura, prison authorities gave them additional time and resources to practice Ashura rituals in common areas, in contrast to previous years, but a media source said this was not true for all prisoners. Some prisoners stated authorities punished them for observing other Shia holidays. The ombudsman’s office reported that based on its prison visits, it found Shia prisoners received adequate religious accommodation. In July, authorities prohibited individuals from gathering to sing a song praising a ninth-century Shia cleric; authorities said the song was Iranian propaganda and summoned and fined individuals who disobeyed. During the year, the government funded the construction and renovation of several Sunni and Shia mosques in multiple parts of the country. Shia sources expressed dissatisfaction that Shia doctrine was not included in Islamic studies in public schools, which they said focused on Sunni Islam. According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to discriminate against Shia citizens and to give Sunni citizens preferential treatment for Ministry of Education (MOE) scholarships and positions in the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and military, and government policy effectively gave preference to Sunni applicants for citizenship.

In June, the King appointed a new cabinet of 22 ministers that included nine professed Shia. One critic said Shia representation should be “at least” half to reflect the country’s religious demographics. In July, the government issued the National Human Rights Plan for 2022-2026, which it developed in consultation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, setting forth government goals for advancing religious freedom and freedom of expression, among other priorities. On April 18, the King met with senior Shia cleric Sayed Abdulla al-Ghuraifi, and they discussed the value of religious discourse, according to reports. Social media commentators described the visit as a trust-building exercise between the government and the Shia community. In November, Pope Francis, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, and other religious leaders from around the world participated in a conference in Manama on East-West peaceful coexistence, and Pope Francis conducted an open-air Mass attended by 30,000 persons.

According to non-Muslim religious groups, there was a high degree of government support for their worship activities.

Anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. NGOs reported on the adverse economic effect of Sunni-Shia tensions and local political divisions. Shia human rights and political activists reported persistently higher unemployment rates, limited prospects for upward social mobility, and lower socioeconomic status for that community compared with the Sunni population. According to minority religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although not for conversion from Islam or for atheistic or secularist views. Non-Muslim religious community leaders again reported converts from Islam were unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions for fear of harassment or discrimination. In September, there was a brief upsurge in antisemitic rhetoric online following an erroneous report that the government intended to establish a Jewish neighborhood in Manama.

U.S. government officials, the Ambassador, and other U.S. embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion or belief and expression, including the right of religious leaders to speak and write freely, and to advocate the full and equal participation of all citizens, irrespective of religious or political affiliation, in political and social activities and economic opportunities. The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders and community members from a broad spectrum of faiths, representatives of NGOs, and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as they related to religious practice. In October, the visiting Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with senior government officials, civil society leaders, youth, students, and members of the local Jewish community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.5 million (midyear 2022). According to the national government, there are approximately 712,000 citizens, constituting less than half of the total population. According to 2020 national

government estimates, Muslims make up approximately 74 percent of the country's total population. Boston University's 2020 World Religions Database states 82 percent of the total (citizen and noncitizen) population is Muslim and 18 percent adheres to other religions and beliefs, such as Christianity (12 percent), and Hinduism (6 percent). According to the database, other groups comprising less than 1 percent total include Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, and atheists. According to Jewish community members, there are between 20-40 Jewish citizens encompassing six families.

The government does not publish statistics regarding the breakdown between the Shia and Sunni Muslim populations. Most estimates from NGOs and the Shia community state Shia Muslims represent a majority (55 to 70 percent) of the citizen population.

Most foreign residents are migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and other Arab countries. According to national government 2020 census data, approximately 401,500 foreign residents are Muslim; 387,800 are Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, Sikh, or Christian (primarily Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, and Mar Thoma Syrian from South India).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, Islam is the official religion, and the state safeguards the country's Islamic heritage. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, freedom to perform religious rites, and freedom to hold religious parades and religious gatherings "in accordance with the customs observed in the country." The constitution provides for the freedom to form associations as long as they do not infringe on the official religion or public order, and it prohibits discrimination based on religion or creed. All citizens have equal rights by law. According to the constitution, all persons are equal without discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, language, or faith. The constitution states that sharia forms the principal basis for legislation, although civil and criminal matters are governed by a civil code.

The labor law pertaining to the private sector prohibits discrimination against workers on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion, or belief. The labor law deems religion-based dismissal to be arbitrary and illegal but does not provide an automatic right to reinstatement. The law also prohibits wage discrimination based on religion, among other factors. The Ministry of Labor (MOL) investigates claims of discrimination where there is an existing labor relationship; it may escalate violations to the Public Prosecution Office. The MOL does not have the authority to receive or manage complaints of religion-based discrimination in hiring. There is no explicit law on discrimination in public sector employment, although such discrimination is governed by the constitution's broader provisions.

The constitution guarantees the right to express and publish opinions, provided these do not infringe on the "fundamental beliefs of Islamic doctrine" and do not prejudice the "unity of the people" or arouse discord or sectarianism.

The law prohibits anti-Islamic publications and broadcast media programs but does not define "anti-Islamic." It mandates imprisonment of no less than six months for "exposing the state's official religion to offense and criticism." The law states, "Any publication that prejudices the ruling system of the country and its official religion can be banned from publication by a ministerial order." The Ministry of Information Affairs determines which materials are governed by this law.

Islamic religious groups must register with the Ministry of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments (MOJIA) to operate. Sunni religious groups register with the ministry through the Sunni Waqf (endowment), while Shia religious groups register through the Jaafari (Shia) Waqf. MOJIA endowment boards supervise, fund, and perform a variety of activities related to mosques and prayer halls. Non-Islamic religious groups must register with and receive a license from the MOSD as a civil society organization in order to operate. Civil society organizations that are Islamic in nature must also register with the MOSD. To register, a group must submit an official letter requesting a license to operate; copies of minutes from the founders' committee meeting; and a detailed list of founders and board members, including names, ages, nationalities, occupations, and addresses. It must also submit other information, such as the group's bylaws, candidates who seek election to the organization's governing board, a physical address, and evidence of a bank account in a bank registered with the Central

Bank of Bahrain. Religious groups also may need approval from the MOE if the public education curriculum is involved; the Ministry of Information Affairs if the group intends to issue religious publications; or the MOI, in coordination with the Central Bank of Bahrain, if the organization receives funding from foreign sources. Individuals affiliated with Islamic organizations seeking to collect money for religious purposes must be Bahraini citizens and must receive approval from the MOJIA.

The law prohibits civil society organizations from engaging in politics. The law prohibits activities falling outside an organization's charter. The penal code does not specifically address the activities of unregistered religious groups but provides for the closing of any unlicensed branch of an international organization plus imprisonment of up to six months and fines of up to 50 dinars (\$130) for the individuals responsible for setting up the branch.

The law prohibits any individual from being a member of a political society or becoming involved in political activities, including running in elections, while serving in a clerical role at a religious institution, including on a voluntary basis.

According to the MOSD's website, the following non-Islamic religious groups are registered with the ministry: the National Evangelical Church, Bahrain Malaylee Church of South India Parish, Word of Life International Church, St. Christopher's Cathedral (Anglican), Church of Philadelphia, St. Mary and Anba Rewis Church (St. Mary's Indian Orthodox Cathedral), Jacobite Syrian Christian Association and St. Peter's Prayer Group (St. Peter's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church), St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church of Christ, Greek Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church, Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Bahrain (Hindu Temple), Indian Religious and Social Group (Hindu Temple), Spiritual Sikh Cultural and Social Group, St. Thomas Evangelical Church of Bahrain, Marthoma Parish, House of Ten Commandments Synagogue, Shri Krishna Hindu Temple, and Baha'i Social Society. Some religious groups, including Shia religious education centers (*hawzas*) seek government licensing for their places of worship, while others choose to operate in private residences. There are 16 registered churches and numerous other Christian places of worship, mostly in Manama.

There is no legal prohibition against apostasy.

The penal code calls for punishment of up to one year's imprisonment or a fine of up to 100 dinars (\$260) for offending one of the recognized religious groups or their practices or openly defaming a religious figure considered sacred to members of a particular group. It punishes an individual for desecration of religious books with up to one year in prison and a fine of 100 dinars (\$260). The law also prohibits any person from imitating in public a religious ritual or ceremony with the intention of ridiculing it. The law stipulates fines or imprisonment for insulting an institution, announcing false or malicious news, spreading rumors, encouraging others to show contempt for a different religious denomination or sect, illegally gathering, or advocating a change of government, among other offenses.

The MOI's Office of the Ombudsman, the Prisoners' and Detainees' Rights Commission, and the NIHR address the rights of prisoners, including the right to practice their religion while incarcerated. The law guarantees inmates of correctional facilities the right to attend burials and receive condolences outside prison.

The law allows prisoners and criminal defendants at their sentencing to receive an "alternative non-custodial sentence" in lieu of incarceration, provided such a sentence would not endanger public security. The judge and the public prosecutor determine an individual's eligibility and conditions for an alternative sentence and the MOI supervises individuals following their release on an alternative sentence. Alternative sentences may include community service, home detention, electronic surveillance, no-contact orders, or participation in rehabilitation programs.

The MOJIA oversees the activities of both the Sunni Waqf and the Jaafari Waqf; the King appoints their governing boards with recommendations from the president of the government-run and funded Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA). The respective waqf boards supervise the activities of mosques and prayer halls, review and approve clerical appointments for religious sites under their purview, and fund expenses for the building and maintenance of religious sites. The government allocates 2.7 million dinars (\$7.1 million) annually to each endowment board. Zakat (Islamic tithes), income from property rentals, and other private sources fund the remainder of the waqf boards' operations. The

waqf boards may pay flat commissions and bonuses to preachers and other religious figures.

By law, the government regulates and monitors the collection of money by religious and other organizations. Islamic organizations wishing to collect money must first obtain authorization from the MOJIA. Authorizations are valid for one year. Non-Islamic organizations must obtain authorization from the MOSD. A 2021 amendment to a royal decree requires the Sunni and Jaafari waqfs to submit annual reports to the MOJIA on funds they collect for religious purposes, including for the construction or renovation of places of worship. The amendment also bans the waqfs from receiving money from abroad without MOJIA approval.

The SCIA oversees general Islamic religious activities taking place within the country as well as the publication of Islamic studies curricula and official religious texts. The council consists of a chair, a deputy chair, and 16 religious scholars – eight Sunni and eight Shia, most of them prominent preachers or sharia judges. The King appoints all council members to a four-year term. Independent of other government scholarship programs, the council offers university scholarships to low-income students for advanced Islamic studies. The SCIA reviews all legislation proposed by parliament to ensure draft laws comply with sharia. The council also consults with other government entities before issuing permits to new Islamic societies or centers. The council is responsible for reviewing the content of Islamic programs broadcast on official government media outlets, such as the official television and radio stations. The council also organizes interfaith conferences and workshops.

The government licenses houses of worship. Permission for construction of a new mosque, whether Shia or Sunni, requires a government determination of the need for a new mosque in the area based on population. The government also determines the need for non-Islamic houses of worship. The King has sole legal authority to allocate public land, including for religious purposes, although he may delegate this authority to government officials. Citizens may also offer private land to build mosques. By law, construction of Islamic places of worship requires MOJIA approval. Non-Islamic groups must obtain MOSD approval. Municipal authorities provide final approval for construction. The law permits

non-Islamic houses of worship to display crosses or other religious symbols outside their premises.

The law regulates Islamic religious instruction at all levels of the education system. In public schools, Islamic studies are mandatory for all Muslim students in grades one through 12 and are optional for non-Muslims. Private schools must register with the government and, with a few exceptions (for example, a foreign-funded and foreign-operated school), are also required to provide Islamic religious education for Muslim students. Private schools wishing to provide non-Islamic religious education to non-Muslims must receive permission from the MOE. Outside of school hours, Muslim students may opt to enroll in Quran recitation courses and religious studies sponsored by the MOJIA, as their parents deem fit.

According to the government, the SCIA provides financial assistance to the six registered *hawzas* (Shia seminaries); other *hawzas* choose to be privately funded. The government does not permit foreign donors to contribute to privately funded *hawzas*. There are no restrictions on religious studies abroad.

Specialized MOE-run religious schools provide more thorough religious instruction – the Jaafari Institute for instruction in Shia Islam and the Religious Institute for instruction in Sunni Islam – for students from elementary through high school. The remainder of the curriculum is consistent with the nonreligious curriculum in other public schools.

The constitution also guarantees the duties and status of women and their equality with men, “without breaching the provisions” of sharia. The personal status law states that either the Sunni or Shia interpretation of sharia, depending on the religious affiliation of the parties, shall govern family matters, including inheritance, child custody, marriage, and divorce. Mixed Sunni-Shia families may choose which court system will hear their case. The provisions of the law on personal status apply to both Shia and Sunni women, requiring a woman’s consent for marriage and permitting women to include conditions in the marriage contract. Under sharia, Muslim men may marry non-Muslim Christian or Jewish women, but not women of other religions; the law considers offspring of such a marriage to be Muslim. Muslim women may not marry non-Muslim men. Non-Muslims may marry in civil or religious ceremonies; however, all marriages must

be registered with a civil court. Civil courts also adjudicate matters such as divorce and child custody for non-Muslims. A woman's court testimony is given equal weight to that of a man. The constitution states inheritance is a guaranteed right governed by sharia, meaning women are entitled to half the share of men.

The government does not designate religious affiliation on national identity documents, including birth certificates. Applications for birth certificates and national identity documents, however, record a child's religion (either Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or other), but not denomination. Hospital admission forms and school registration forms may also request information on an individual's religion.

The constitution says the state shall strive to strengthen ties with Islamic countries. It specifies that succession to the position of king is hereditary, passing from eldest son to eldest son. The royal family is Sunni.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with reservations stating it interprets the covenant's provisions relating to freedom of religion, family rights, and equality between men and women before the law as "not affecting in any way" the prescriptions of sharia.

Government Practices

On March 4, the UN ECOSOC released a report that stated, "Despite the constitutional prohibition of discrimination based on religious affiliation, members of the Shia community reportedly face discrimination in education, employment, and in the exercise of their cultural rights." The committee stated it was "also concerned about reports of harassment, intimidation, arrests, and detention of religious and cultural figures."

In November, the UNHRC released its fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the country. The UNHRC stated it was "concerned about the existence of practices that adversely affected the exercise of freedom of conscience, at reports that members of the Shia community had been subjected to restrictions on their rights to worship and profess their religious beliefs, and that liberty of conscience was not guaranteed effectively." Among other recommendations, it called on the government to decriminalize blasphemy. In the government's national report submitted to the UNHRC ahead of the UPR, it stated that the constitution

“guarantee[d] the right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly,” that labor laws “prohibit[ed] discrimination against employees on grounds of gender, origin, language, religion or creed,” and that “in order to promote social security and peaceful coexistence, the Ministry of Justice [took] great care to control, monitor, and analyze the content of religious sermons, and [had] a comprehensive national strategy to address social issues and negative phenomena resulting from extremist ideology by updating the language used in such sermons in such a way as to strengthen social unity, maintain cohesion in the national social fabric and put an end to deviant ideology which gives rise to extremism and bigotry.”

Reflecting the country’s demographics, the majority of citizen detainees and prisoners were Shia. Human rights groups reported security officials mistreated prisoners. NGOs reported prison authorities routinely denied Shia prisoners needed medical treatment more often than Sunni prisoners. On February 13, NIHR said it investigated complaints submitted by detainees in prison, primarily about lack of access to medical services. At year’s end, NIHR had not yet published its annual report or final figures on the outcomes of its investigations.

On June 2, Amnesty International Bahrain posted a statement on Twitter accusing the authorities of “acting with gross negligence in the face of confirmed tuberculosis infections” at Jaw Prison. Members of the Shia opposition held multiple small-scale demonstrations on the evening of Friday, June 3, alleging medical mistreatment of Shia political prisoners.

Shia opposition figure Shaikh Abduljalil al-Meqdad said in an audio recording released September 29 from his cell in Jaw Prison that five prison guards attempted to assault him for refusing to attend his medical appointment. Al-Meqdad was serving a life sentence for forming a terrorist group with intent to overthrow the system of government and change the constitution and for collaboration with a foreign state. The NGO Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) stated in October that his conviction was politically motivated. The ombudsman and the NIHR investigated al-Meqdad’s allegations, reviewing CCTV footage and interviewing prison guards, and said they found no evidence of physical abuse. They stated al-Meqdad and the prison guards had a verbal altercation, but no physical assault occurred. Other sources, including ADHRB, the Gulf Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and *Middle*

East Eye, stated some prison officers attempted a physical assault but others stopped it and that al-Meqdad had numerous health conditions that were being neglected by the prison authorities.

The online opposition media outlet *Bahrain Mirror* reported that in March, authorities sentenced Shia scholar Mohammed al-Madi to one year in prison for insulting seventh-century Umayyad ruler Mu'awiya bin Abi Sufyan (Mu'awiya I), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Madi was released early by royal decree after serving only 15 days of his sentence, according to opposition sources.

Several Shia clerics arrested during the country's 2011 antigovernment protests, including banned Shia political party al-Wifaq's Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman, remained in prison at year's end, serving sentences ranging from 15 years to life in prison on charges related to terrorist activity, seeking to overthrow the monarchy, treason, or inciting hatred. Some human rights NGOs considered them to be political prisoners. According to sources, peaceful protesters on February 13 and 14 commemorated the anniversary of the 2011 protests, chanting slogans against King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and displaying pictures of exiled and jailed opposition figures.

The ombudsman stated the office received 631 complaints and assistance requests from inmates and detainees from May 1, 2021, to April 30, 2022, compared with 691 complaints and assistance requests filed in the preceding 12-month period. The ombudsman stated most prisoners' mistreatment complaints were related to verbal abuse and excessive use of solitary confinement.

During the year, several inmates received permission to leave the prison to attend funerals.

The government continued to enforce Ramadan fasting restrictions in public spaces on non-Muslims. The MOI said images widely circulated on social media of foreign workers in Manama eating during Ramadan led the Capital Governorate Police Directorate to take legal action. During the year, the government charged nine individuals with violating Ramadan fasting restrictions.

The government reported that during the year, it imprisoned three persons for insulting religious symbols. Six individuals were imprisoned, four received fines,

one received probation, and one investigation was pending at year's end for other unspecified "crimes affecting religion."

Zuhair Ebrahim Jassim and Hussain Abdulla Khalil Rashid, two Shia prisoners, remained on death row at year's end. In 2020, they were convicted of involvement in targeting security forces and killing one police officer in a police bus explosion in November 2017 and killing another officer in a bomb explosion in Damistan village in 2014. NGOs said their confessions were obtained through torture and that the trial proceedings were unfair.

King Hamad pardoned 160 prisoners by royal decree and the MOI released 69 prisoners on alternative sentences on April 28 for Eid al-Fitr. King Hamad pardoned 58 prisoners and the MOI released 49 others on alternative sentences on July 9 for Eid al-Adha.

MOI's Anticybercrime Directorate reported it continued to monitor social media for indecency, blasphemy, incitements to sectarianism, and offenses to the sanctity of religion. In August, the directorate arrested two citizens, one of them a 17-year-old, for posts on TikTok that insulted religious figures and for misuse of telecommunications equipment. The courts sentenced the 17-year-old to a one-month suspended prison sentence and the adult to a two-month suspended sentence.

According to the government, during the year, the MOI did not investigate any individuals for defamation of religion, a charge usually stemming from statements made during sermons. This compared with 26 such investigations and six prosecutions in 2021.

The government reported in November that it detained four persons on charges of witchcraft and sorcery but did not provide further details.

On June 9, the MOSD permitted the reopening of the Islamic Enlightenment Shia Society, the charity wing of the banned al-Wifaq Shia political party, three years after the Supreme Civil Court reversed a 2016 MOSD order to dissolve the party, liquidate its assets, and place it under judicial receivership over charges related to misappropriation of funds.

NGOs reported the government continued to closely monitor the collection of funds, including charitable donations, by religious organizations, with some NGOs describing this as government overreach. Religious groups stated the arduous bureaucratic process to receive funding and send donations abroad constituted a de facto ban on receiving grants, donating to, or transferring money from entities outside of the country.

In July, the MOJIA launched a campaign urging people to check the ministry's list of individuals authorized to collect funds for religious purposes before sending money to an organization. According to the MOJIA, the awareness campaign was part of the government's efforts to combat money laundering and terrorism financing. Of 72 fundraiser requests received during the year, the MOJIA reported approving 51 individuals to accept funds from local sources. There were 60 licensed fund collectors on the MOJIA's website at year end.

The government continued to monitor and provide general guidance on the content of sermons by sending circulars to mosques. The MOJIA continued to monitor clerics' adherence to a pledge of ethics it created for individuals engaged in religious discourse. According to the MOJIA, preachers who diverged from the pledge were subject to censure or removal by authorities on the grounds that their actions jeopardized national security. The MOJIA reported reviewing on a weekly basis sermons preachers submitted to the government. The MOJIA reported regularly visiting mosques on unannounced visits to ensure that preachers' sermons were "moderate," avoided discussing controversial topics, did not incite violence, and did not use religious discourse to serve political purposes.

According to members of the Shia community, unlike in previous years, MOI did not summon clerics for questioning related to the content of their sermons. There were no reports of the government detaining or arresting Shia clerics for what the government deemed objectionable content in their sermons during Ashura.

According to social media posts associated with the political opposition, the MOI summoned several Shia activists for questioning in early April. Shia political activist Ali Muhanna, one of those summoned, later posted a video stating the MOI summoned 13 additional persons for participating in regular peaceful protests in Sanabis, a suburb of Manama. Al-Wifaq reported that the MOI

summoned several individuals in early May for participation in Jerusalem (Quds) Day protests on April 29, adding that several Shia opposition figures had been summoned on repeated occasions for questioning in connection with protest activities.

According to the NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, in March, authorities punished Shia prisoners for participating in commemoration events in prison marking the anniversary of the death of Imam Musa al-Kadhim, the seventh imam of Shia Islam, by prohibiting them from contacting their families for a week following the commemorations.

On July 14, opposition social media accounts reported the MOI removed banners that were placed in the village of Barbar to commemorate Eid al-Qadr, which took place on July 16-17. According to government supporters, the MOI intervened whenever home or business owners filed a complaint because individuals had placed the banners or signs outside their premises without the owners' consent.

Sources reported that, unlike in prior years, authorities did not take down banners during the holy month of Muharram (July 31-August 28).

Opposition social media reported that the government banned two Shia religious gatherings, both called *Salam Ya Mahdi*, that were planned in Dair village on July 13 and in Sitra village on July 16. The gatherings were named after the song *Salam Ya Mahdi* ("Hello Oh Mahdi") – the Arabic version of an Iranian song called *Salam Farmandeh* ("Hello Commander"). The original Farsi song expressed devotion to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and made references to former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps general Qassim Soleimani. The song was rewritten in Arabic with lyrics expressing devotion to Muhammad al-Mahdi (the Hidden Imam), a ninth-century Shia cleric and messianic figure, and sung by a Bahraini singer. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported (RFE) reported authorities viewed the song as Iranian propaganda aimed at children. During his July 13 sermon, Shia scholar Abdulla al-Ghuraifi criticized authorities for banning the *Salam Ya Mahdi* events and accused them of inciting hatred against Shia. On July 17, al-Wifaq reported authorities summoned the caretaker of the Imam al-Sadeq Mosque in Diraz and warned him against accommodating a *Salam Ya Mahdi* gathering that was planned for July 18. In response, protestors organized a car rally in Manama during which they chanted *Salam Ya Mahdi* and played it on

loudspeakers. The Traffic Directorate reportedly summoned several individuals, fined them, and seized their vehicles for impeding traffic. In most villages, organizers incorporated the *Salam Ya Mahdi* song in Eid al-Qadr celebrations, including in Sitra, Markh, and Buri *maatams* (Shia prayer houses, sometimes called *husseiniyas* in other countries) and near al-Ajam al-Kabeer maatam in Manama. Speaking at a maatam, Shia scholar al-Ghuraifi stated he disapproved of the MOI summoning individuals for “chanting peacefully” and said that “people have the right to express their beliefs.”

The government in February lifted COVID-19 restrictions on Ashura gatherings, which authorities had imposed in 2020. According to procession organizers, more than 100,000 Shia Muslims gathered in central Manama to mark Ashura on August 7-8.

According to prisoners’ families, prisoners reported significant positive changes from previous years in conducting religious processions during Muharram, including for Ashura, such as authorities giving prisoners additional time to commemorate Ashura and gather after the religious processions. During site visits to the Dry Dock detention facility and Jaw Prison in August, the NIHR stated authorities gave Shia inmates additional time to practice Ashura rituals in common areas. They also reported the prison provided books, banners, and religious chanters to facilitate Ashura commemorations as well as TV screens on which to watch processions and allowed prisoners to gather in designated areas to commemorate Ashura en masse. *Bahrain Mirror*, however, reported authorities in Jaw Prison prevented some prisoners from practicing religious rituals during Muharram. Human rights activist Yousif al-Muhafda told the news outlet prison guards “mobilized” to prevent detainees from exercising their religious freedoms. He said prisoners feared guards would beat them if they did not comply. On August 2, Sayed Ahmed al-Wadaei of the London-based Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy posted on Twitter that prison authorities did not provide access to certain Shia religious books during this time.

According to a July statement by the Minister of Interior, the government permitted individuals and families from outside of the country to participate in Ashura rituals, but, in response to commercial advertisements inviting tourist groups from Kuwait to participate in Ashura processions in Bahrain, for the first time barred large groups from abroad arranged by travel agencies. The

government said it wanted to “protect the spirituality” of the event and not let Ashura devolve into a tourist spectacle.

On October 12, ADHRB called on Pope Francis to reconsider his decision to visit the country on November 3-6, citing religious discrimination against Shia individuals and mistreatment of Shia political prisoners. Other media sources reported human rights activists said the pontiff should use his visit to speak out for Shia rights and meet with prisoners. On November 1, Amnesty International’s Bahrain researcher told the Associated Press, “The watchwords of this [papal] visit are coexistence and dialogue, and the Bahraini government suppresses civil and political freedoms, without which coexistence and dialogue cannot be sustained.”

Vatican News reported that on November 5, Pope Francis presided at a Mass at Bahrain National Stadium in Riffa, a suburb of Manama, before a crowd of approximately 30,000 Catholics and others from across the region. Voice of America stated one of King Hamad’s sons and several government ministers also attended.

The MOI stated its community policing program enlisted individuals directly from local communities, including Shia citizens, to act as informal community police, with the goals of maintaining local peace and security, resolving local issues at the community level, and avoiding escalating conflicts to law enforcement authorities. The MOI stated these informal community police monitored religious gatherings and funerals to prevent those gatherings from degenerating into protests or acts of violence. The government-affiliated Bahrain News Agency reported in August that police directorates “continued their field visits to inspect the needs of maatams” and that “community police provided facilities and services around community centers [maatams] and were involved in safety awareness campaigns.”

In June, opposition social media stated that authorities required Shia citizens seeking to travel through Bahrain International Airport to visit religious shrines in Iran, Iraq, and Syria to register their travel and receive permission from the government, citing security issues. Some progovernment commentators said the government imposed the restrictions due to suspected links between Shia pilgrims and extremists based in these countries. Local sources said the

government did not enforce the policy uniformly. According to reports, many travelers went through Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE instead. Individuals posted videos to Twitter of protestors in the village of Sanabis chanting antiregime slogans in response to the reported travel restrictions. Other opposition figures condemned the government for operating direct flights to Israel while restricting Shia individuals from visiting religious shrines in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Some travel agents and citizens said the registration and permission procedures were smooth and they were allowed to travel to Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

There were conflicting reports of whether citizens needed government permission to travel to Iraq for al-Arbaeen ceremonies, a major religious ritual in which Shia Muslims commemorate the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein bin Ali. On September 9, Safa al-Khawaja, a member of the dissolved Bahrain Center for Human Rights, stated on social media that she was able to travel to Iraq. On September 9 and 10, however, the leaders of the dissolved Shia Scholars' Council reported on their social media accounts that authorities prevented them from traveling to Iraq.

Media reported that in December, thousands of Shia commemorated the martyrdom of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, in street processions and at maatams and mosques throughout the country.

Alternative noncustodial sentencing beneficiaries stated authorities prohibited them from participating in social, cultural, and religious activities, including visiting mosques and maatams, or attending religious commemorations while serving their sentences.

The MOJIA opened all places of worships at full capacity starting on February 15. No physical distancing or proof of vaccination was required. Masks remained mandatory in religious venues until May.

On November 10, in advance of parliamentary elections on November 12, Amnesty International issued a statement calling on the government to lift its ban on the Shia-affiliated al-Wifaq and Amal opposition parties and the Wa'ad secular opposition party. Amnesty International said, "The banning of parties which have peacefully sought to change the system of government by legal means such as

participating in elections is a flagrant violation of the right to freedom of association.”

The law prohibiting political activities at worship centers remained in effect. The government did not allow individuals to use mosques, maatams, or other religious sites for political gatherings.

Adherents of minority religious groups reported they were able to produce religious media and publications and distribute them in bookstores and churches, although the government did not permit publications it perceived as criticizing Islam. The Ministry of Information Affairs continued to review all books and publications prior to issuing printing licenses. The MOJIA also continued to review books that discussed religion.

According to representatives from the Christian and Hindu communities, the government did not interfere with their religious observances. Government officials made public statements encouraging tolerance for minority religious beliefs and traditions.

The government reported there were 575 licensed Sunni mosques, a decrease from 598 in 2021. Authorities decreased the number of licensed Shia mosques to 762 (from 763 in 2021) and increased the number of maatams to 634 (from 624 in 2021). No mosques or maatams were closed during the year for violating COVID-19 guidelines. The MOJIA’s website listed 100 Quran centers (where children memorize the Quran), 78 religious centers, 7 community awareness centers, and 5 sharia institutes.

During the year, the government granted permits to build 14 new Sunni mosques and seven Shia mosques and maatams. In April, Prime Minister Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who is also the Crown Prince, announced the restoration of 20 Sunni and Shia mosques, the construction of 12 new mosques (six Sunni and six Shia) in Salman City, and the launch of a development plan for mosques across the governorates. According to the Jaafari Waqf, 13 of the 20 to be restored would be Shia. On April 13, Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments Nawaf bin Mohammed al-Maawda stated that six mosques would open during the year in Isa Town, Jurdab, Salhiya, Khalifa Town, Eastern Hidd, and Jaw. Fourteen other mosques in Manama, Juffair, Naeem, Eker, Salmaniya, Sitra,

Sadad, Adhari, Jid el-Haj, and Hamad Town were under renovation at year's end. On April 9, Minister al-Maawda said the Sunni Waqf allocated 800,000 dinars (\$2.1 million) during the year for the maintenance of all existing Sunni mosques.

Photographs posted on social media in April and May showed that worshippers gathered occasionally for prayer at the former sites of Shia mosques that the government demolished in the 2011 uprising, which appeared in the photographs to be empty plots or parking lots.

On February 1, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi thanked Prime Minister Salman via Twitter for the government's decision to allot land for the construction of an additional Hindu temple in Manama. The Hindu religious group Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha was expected to oversee construction of the complex, with a planned prayer hall, community center, amphitheater, food court, and other facilities. Construction had not begun on the new Hindu temple as of year's end.

As of year's end, the municipality of Awali had not approved requests from three congregations seeking since 2014 to construct new churches on land donated by the King for that purpose; municipal authorities cited unspecified security concerns. The municipality made no public statements about the delay in responding to the congregations' requests.

The Christian Cemeteries Committee began a campaign to raise \$50,000 (133,000 dinars) to construct a new Christian cemetery in Salmabad. The new cemetery would be the third Christian cemetery in the country. The government officially allocated the land in late February, eight years after Christian community leaders notified the government in 2014 that they had filled the country's second Christian cemetery's final burial plot.

The government reported it did not receive any new requests during the year from religious groups seeking formal registration. It continued to permit both registered and unregistered non-Muslim religious communities to maintain identifiable places of worship, hold religious gatherings, and display religious symbols, such as crosses outside churches.

Shia sources expressed dissatisfaction that Shia doctrine was not included in Islamic studies in public schools, which they said focused on Sunni Islam.

The independent but government-affiliated King Hamad Global Center for Peaceful Coexistence (King Hamad Center) continued to offer student exchanges and educational programs that it stated were focused on dispelling ignorance, discrimination, and intolerance, including religious intolerance. These included the King Hamad Faith in Leadership Program and the Cyber Peace Academy. The center's board of trustees comprised representatives of the country's Sunni, Shia, Christian, Baha'i, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. In April, the center signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Haifa to promote coexistence between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

The public University of Bahrain continued to offer degree programs in religious studies and Islamic jurisprudence for Shia and Sunni students. In January, *Bahrain Mirror* reported that human rights activist al-Muhafda posted to Twitter that Shia students had complained to him that a required religious text in the Islamic Studies degree program "insults a symbol of the Shiite community." He demanded an independent inquiry into the matter. He did not specify the nature of what he considered the objectionable material.

All students, regardless of religious affiliation, were eligible to participate in the Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP); the government did not provide a statistical breakdown of participants by religious affiliation. CPISP published a list of scholarship recipients' names, fields of study, and schools on its website.

Human rights activists continued to state the MOE discriminated against Shia students in university scholarship distribution.

There were reports that the MOE refused to recognize degrees granted by higher education institutions in foreign countries serving students who were unable to access scholarships in Bahrain or had limited financial means. Some activists said these refusals disproportionately affected Shia students, who were more likely to be in those circumstances. A member of parliament criticized the MOE for failing to accredit advanced degrees obtained from foreign universities. In response, then Minister of Education Majid bin Ali al-Nuaimi stated during the April 5

session of the Council of Representatives that the Diplomas Evaluation Committee (which assesses the qualifications of foreign advanced degrees in the humanities and social sciences) approved more than 6,000 masters and doctoral theses from foreign universities and rejected 12 on the grounds they harmed national unity or incited sectarianism, after requiring another 20 graduates to revise their theses.

On March 16, the Ministry of Works, Municipalities Affairs, and Urban Planning announced the beginning of construction of the Sheikh Abdulla bin Khalid Faculty for Islamic Studies, to be located in the Southern Governorate. The project was expected to cost 1.1 million dinars (\$2.9 million) and be finished in March 2023.

The government-run television station Bahrain TV broadcast Friday sermons from the country's official al-Fateh Mosque and other Sunni mosques, such as Sabeeka bint Ebrahim Mosque and Sabeeka al-Nusf Mosque, but not sermons from Shia mosques or clerics. Some Shia activists said this was discriminatory, while others said it was better not to be subject to government broadcasting restrictions. Many Shia mosques disseminated sermons via social media. A government-affiliated human rights monitoring organization and family members of prisoners said Shia prisoners could view Shia sermon videos on their mobile telephones.

A November article in the *Economist* quoted a local businessman as saying that hunger and limited opportunities could ignite a wave of protests among the Shia population. The article said the Prime Minister "won praise for rolling out COVID-19 vaccines to all Bahrainis, regardless of sect," but that "his failure to soothe Sunni-Shia tensions [was] setting Bahrain up for trouble." One Shia businessman told the *Economist*, "The sectarian divide from a decade ago [during the 2011 antigovernment protests] hasn't healed."

On November 3-4, the government, in partnership with the Muslim Council of Elders, SCIA, and King Hamad Center, hosted the "Bahrain Forum for Dialogue: East and West for Human Coexistence" in Manama. Pope Francis, Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb (the most senior figure in Sunni Islam), Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, and 200 other religious leaders and prominent academic and media figures from around the world attended. During the forum, some European and Bahraini participants said the government did not adequately address the vulnerability of atheist youths, who risked ostracism, homelessness, and sometimes physical harm for their lack of belief.

While by law Arab applicants with 15 years' residence and non-Arab applicants with 25 years' residence are eligible to apply for citizenship, arbitrary implementation of the law from the application stage to approval remained a common criticism of both Shia and Sunni citizens, as well as migrant rights activists. The government stated foreign residents applying for citizenship were not required to report their religious affiliation. Shia politicians and community activists, however, continued to say the government's naturalization and citizenship process favored Sunni over Shia applicants. They said the government continued to recruit Sunnis from other countries to join the security forces, granted them expedited naturalization, and provided them with public housing, while excluding Shia citizens from those forces. According to Shia community activists, the continued recruitment and expedited naturalization of Sunnis represented an ongoing attempt to alter the demographic balance of the country's citizens.

The King appointed a new cabinet, selected by the Prime Minister, whose members were sworn in on June 15. The government did not maintain official statistics on the religious affiliation of public sector employees, members of parliament, or ministers, but nine of the 22 ministers publicly identified as Shia. A June 16 editorial in *Bahrain Mirror* stated the Prime Minister should have selected "at least" an equal number of Sunni and Shia individuals, considering the country's Shia majority. Following parliamentary elections in 2018, of 40 seats on the elected Council of Representatives, 25 were won by members identified as Sunnis and 15 by members identified as Shia. According to informal estimates, the Shura Council, parliament's upper house whose members are appointed by the King, included 19 Shia members, one Jewish member, and one Christian member, while the remaining 19 members were Sunni.

According to Shia leaders and community activists, the government continued to give Sunni citizens preference for government positions, especially in the managerial ranks of the civil service, military, and security services. They also said Sunnis received preference for other government-related employment, especially in the managerial ranks of state-owned businesses. Few Shia citizens served in leadership posts in the defense and internal security forces. According to Shia community members, senior civil service recruitment and promotion processes favored Sunni candidates.

Shia community members said educational, social, and municipal services in most Shia neighborhoods remained inferior to those in Sunni communities. The government stated it made efforts to support public schools in Shia and Sunni neighborhoods equally. The MOSD organized expositions, job fairs, professional guidance, and assistance to needy families in predominately Shia neighborhoods.

The MOSD, which has a supervisory role in implementing labor law in the private sector, again said there were no reported cases of religious or sectarian discrimination during the year. Shia community activists again responded that they lacked confidence in the effectiveness of government institutions to address discrimination and therefore did not utilize them.

In July, the government issued the *National Human Rights Plan for 2022-2026*. The plan, developed in consultation with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, included discussion of religious freedom and freedom of expression, among other topics. It called for implementing education reform, a review of relevant laws, capacity building through training and seminars, and other projects to advance the country's objectives of promoting religious freedom and "enabling a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence." The plan outlined the government's intent to develop television programs and films on tolerance and religious coexistence, periodically review controls on religious discourse, and review relevant laws and develop amendments "to guarantee the enjoyment of religious freedom for all." During a July international Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London, Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullatif bin Rashid al-Zayani commended what he said was the positive state of freedom of religion and tolerance in the country. Al-Zayani said that freedom of religion was the main objective of the 2022-2026 National Human Rights Plan.

In February, then-Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett met with King Hamad and Prime Minister Salman in Manama, becoming the first Israeli head of state to visit the country. During his visit, Prime Minister Bennett met also with members of the Jewish community. Bahrain's most senior Shia cleric, Sheikh Isa Qassim (whose citizenship the government revoked in 2016 and who resides in exile in Iran), and al-Wifaq representatives issued statements condemning the visit. There were also reportedly small nonviolent protests in some Shia villages marking the anniversary of the 2011 antigovernment protests and criticizing the government's normalization of relations with Israel. Opposition-linked social

media accounts shared pictures of signs in the town of Abu Saiba on February 14 bearing the al-Wifaq slogan “United on the Path of Righteousness” and picturing Sheikh Qassim next to what the accounts described as martyrs from the 2011 unrest.

In April during Ramadan, local media outlet *al-Watan* reported the King, as he had done in prior years, met with senior Shia cleric al-Ghuraifi, a founding member of Hizb al-Da’awa in the late 1960’s, later rebranded as al-Wifaq. The two men discussed the value of religious discourse. The King said clerics were “role models in religion, morals, and enlightened discourse.” Social media commentators described the visit as a trust-building exercise for the government and Shia community.

From May 31-June 1, the King Hamad Center hosted the EU-Bahrain conference entitled “Broadening the Tent: Freedom of Religion and Belief” in Manama. The conference featured religious community leaders, and politicians from Europe and neighboring countries.

Bahrain News Agency reported that on September 6, Shaikh Khalid bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, chairperson of the King Hamad Center, met with Captain Doug Newman, regional commander of the Salvation Army for the Middle East Region. They discussed future cooperation on projects to promote religious tolerance. Newman expressed the Salvation Army's desire to make the country the headquarters of its regional activities. He praised what he said were the country’s efforts, led by King Hamad, in promoting peace in the region as well as what he termed the center’s efforts in spreading tolerance and coexistence as part of its humanitarian and charity work.

On November 3, the President of the SCIA, Sheikh Abdulrahman bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, announced the new King Hamad Prize for Dialogue and Coexistence to recognize the importance of fostering peaceful dialogue between different cultures and religions.

The Muslim Council of Elders, an international independent organization founded in Abu Dhabi by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar with the expressed aim of promoting peace in Muslim-majority countries, held its 16th session in Manama on November 3-4, during the Bahrain Forum for Dialogue.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Non-Muslim religious community leaders again reported that there was ongoing societal pressure on individuals not to convert from Islam. Those who did so were unwilling to speak publicly or privately to family or associates about their conversions out of fear of harassment or discrimination.

Sources reported local society continued to reject any forms of atheism.

Both anti-Shia and anti-Sunni commentary appeared in social media. Anti-Shia posts described Shia opponents of the government as “traitors,” “agents of Iran,” “terrorists,” “killers,” “criminals,” “plotters,” and, occasionally, “*rawafid*” (a derogatory term describing Shia who refused to accept the early caliphs). Anti-Sunni posts described the ruling Al Khalifa family and its supporters as “*nawasib*” (a derogatory term describing Sunnis who are hostile to the family of the Prophet Muhammad).

NGOs working on civil discourse and interfaith dialogue reported Sunni-Shia tensions and historical political divisions continued to have negative economic effects. Shia representatives stated the persistently higher unemployment rate among members of their community, limited prospects for upward social mobility, and the lower socioeconomic status of Shia added to the tensions between the two communities.

According to minority religious groups, there was a high degree of tolerance within society for minority religious beliefs and traditions, although not for conversion from Islam or for atheistic or secularist views. Holiday foods, decorations, posters, and books were widely available during major Christian, Jewish, and Hindu holidays, and Christmas trees and elaborate decorations remained prominent features in malls, restaurants, coffee shops, and hotels. The news media continued to print reports of non-Muslim religious holiday celebrations, including Christmas and Jewish celebrations such as Hanukkah and Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Holi.

In May and June, the UAE research and consulting firm ASDA’A-BCW conducted a poll of youth between the ages of 18 and 24 in 17 Arab states and territories and

reported 59 percent of Bahraini respondents said preserving their religious and cultural identity was more important than creating a more globalized society.

Conspiracy theories that the government intended to establish a Jewish neighborhood in Manama were accompanied by a brief surge in online antisemitic rhetoric in September, which included one social media account posting a political cartoon with the presumed likeness of a well-known member of the local Jewish community. Online sources, including some from outside the country, said Jews would take over culturally important parts of Manama's downtown area. The House of Ten Commandments Synagogue and the government refuted the claims, and the controversy dissipated.

According to social media sources, government opponents organized approximately six small-scale unauthorized demonstrations from December 18 to 25, coinciding with Hanukkah, in Sitra, Diraz, Almarkh, and Muqasha, all with high percentages of Shia residents, in addition to a larger demonstration in the market in Manama. One social media post read, "In rejection of the Jewish Hanukkah events ... the youth of Sitra invite you to the central march under the slogan 'Do not desecrate our land'." On December 25, protesters staged peaceful demonstrations in the Manama souq in rejection of Hanukkah celebrations and normalization of relations with Israel. Videos circulating online showed persons chanting "Death to Israel" near the House of Ten Commandments Synagogue. The region's oldest synagogue, it hosted approximately 300 Hanukkah observers from Israel, Europe, and the United States, as well as visitors from other local religious communities, throughout the week. Several government-affiliated newspapers issued columns defending the right of Bahrainis and visitors to carry out their religious practices.

According to Jewish community representatives, the House of Ten Commandments Synagogue publicly observed Jewish traditions and held prayers in the downtown area of the capital. The synagogue continued to host visitors to the country and provide services to Jewish families from neighboring countries. The Association of Gulf Jewish Communities launched a campaign to restore the area's only Jewish cemetery, located in Manama. Kosher-certified food products were available in supermarkets, and meals prepared under kashrut supervision.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador, other senior U.S. government officials, and embassy representatives met with senior government officials, including the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and the Minister of Justice, Islamic Affairs, and Endowments, and other cabinet officials, and at the MOSD, Ministry of Legal Affairs, and national human rights monitoring institutions to urge respect for freedom of religion and expression, including the right of clerics and other religious leaders to speak and write freely. Embassy officials encouraged continued government efforts to counter religious extremism and to ensure full inclusion of all citizens, including members of the Shia majority, in political, social, and economic opportunities. U.S. officials publicly and in private meetings advocated that the government pursue political reforms that took into consideration the needs of all citizens regardless of religious or prior or current political affiliation by, for example, engaging civil society in reconciliation dialogue, encouraging an impartial application process for government positions, and allowing individuals previously connected to religiously based opposition political groups to run for public office.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met regularly with religious leaders from the Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and other communities as well as representatives of NGOs and political groups to discuss freedom of religion and freedom of expression as it related to religious practices. Embassy representatives and senior U.S. officials visited various houses of worship and attended religious events during the year, including observations of Ashura, Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, Hannukah, and Diwali. At these events, they discussed issues related to religious tolerance with participants and emphasized the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

On October 12 to 13, the U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism met with senior government officials to discuss joint efforts to combat antisemitism in all its forms. Government officials made public statements in support of the visit and emphasizing the principles of peace and coexistence. The Deputy Special Envoy and the chair of the King Hamad Center met to discuss potential opportunities for cooperation on combating antisemitism.

The Deputy Special Envoy also met with civil society leaders and members of the Jewish community. He gave an interview with Arabic daily al-Ayam in which he

stressed the need to decouple geopolitics from religious issues and clarified that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and antisemitism were separate questions. During the Deputy Special Envoy's visit, the Ambassador hosted an event with current and former government officials and others at which participants discussed the importance of educating young people about the country's Jewish history as well as the Holocaust. The embassy subsequently hosted an October discussion on antisemitism with local youth and university students; the students highlighted the presence of an Indigenous Jewish population and what they stated was the country's tradition of inclusion and respect for various religions.

The embassy continued to encourage the participation of religious leaders in exchange programs in the United States designed to promote religious tolerance and a better understanding of the right to practice one's faith as a fundamental human right and source of stability. The embassy regularly highlighted on social media high level engagements with religious leaders and the embassy's participation in religious observances, for example, during Eid al-Fitr, Ashura, Diwali, and Ramadan, as part of its efforts to advance freedom of religion and belief.